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# THE BIBLICAL WORLD

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## *The Old and New Testament Student*

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Is it not a significant fact that the Parliament of Religions which has been holding its sessions during the past month was gathered in a Christian land and under Christian auspices? Was it merely a concatenation of chance circumstances that brought the Parliament to this country? We had a great Exposition; everything under heaven was collected here; congresses on every conceivable topic of human knowledge and activity were assembled; why not an aggregation of religions and a comparison of religious faiths?—hence the Parliament! That may account for the suggestion. It does not explain the turning of the thought into act and achievement. The Parliament is the thing to be accounted for, not the dream, the suggestion, the unrealized ideal which lay behind it. And therefore the question persists, Is there any significance in the consummation of this Parliament in a Christian land and under Christian leadership? The problem is really worth considering. We put it in its extreme form in the following proposition: It is demonstrably certain that Christianity, and Christianity alone, could originate and carry through to a successful issue such a wonderful enterprise as the harmonious conference of the world's religions.

FIRST, Christianity alone has the interest in such a conference sufficient to ensure its success. To Jesus Christ every thought of every man about God and every endeavor of every man to serve God were supremely interesting. His followers cannot

but catch something of his spirit. The comparative study of religion is a science born in Christian lands and indebted for a large part of its facts to the work of missionaries who studied the religions which they sought to supplant. It is often the case that the toleration which is the boast of some non-christian religions is the toleration of indifference and selfishness. Christianity may have been often intolerant, but her intolerance has had at its root the profoundest concern for man as a religious being. That spirit, when sweetened and broadened, works out into the intelligent and sympathetic consideration for the religious beliefs of man. The question of the Christian missionary, "Must I not carry my knowledge of God's saving love to other men?" involves the counter question, "What do they already know about it?" And by the fundamental principles of the Gospel all Christians are missionaries, and hence in the Christian world at large has arisen this interest in other religions which has been one element in the realization of this Parliament in a Christian country.

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SECOND, the essential unity of Christianity has been a factor in making the Parliament a reality. Talk as you will about a divided Christendom, it cannot be denied that there is among Christian sects and parties and churches a basis of living union such as no other religion at present possesses. In the person of Jesus Christ, in the faith and love of Jesus Christ, all Christendom is one, and a like centre cannot be found in any other of the world's religions. Hence when the heart of Christendom makes itself felt, one impulse is received—we act as one. Such a unity made it possible to hope to realize this Parliament; it gave a platform high enough from which to call the world together and broad enough to gather them all and have room enough to move about without crush and crowd. What other religion of the world to-day can speak so unitedly with voice and act? Not India, with her thousand sects and want of a central thought and life. Not Islam, whose parties are as wide apart as the poles, and who have only a dead Mohammed to hold them together. Not any of them all, but Christianity with the living Christ.

THIRD, Christianity alone could face the consequences which such a Parliament brings in its train. Carelessness about results of comparison with other religions is somehow characteristic of the faith of the Gospel. This carelessness may be audacious and unjustifiable; may be attended with temporary injury to believers. But it is the carelessness of unconscious superiority, of unbounded resources, of undaunted belief in the possession of the future. Other faiths may be able to stand comparison as well as Christianity. To that we do not refer now. Christianity may have no good grounds for inviting other faiths to measure themselves against her, but she has proved in this Parliament that she is perfectly ready to invite comparison. An interesting instance in illustration of the point is this. In the provisional program of the Parliament one of the subjects suggested for presentation was "The defects of each religious system represented, to be stated in each case by an adherent of that faith." In the actual sessions that topic was not brought forward. And yet in the case of our own religion criticism was heard not only from ourselves but from the representatives of other religions. Hardly a word was uttered by Christians against any defect in non-Christian faiths and nothing of the sort by their adherents. This fact so significant can only mean that it is Christianity alone which is ready to stand criticism, invites judgment, throws herself open in a free, bold way, heedless of consequences, to the most searching demands of the human spirit. Such a faith alone could call other religions to conference and council with prospect of a successful assembling of the representative religions of the world. One cannot help seeing that this Parliament was in one sense the test, the trial, of Christianity itself, and nothing could be more evident than that Christianity welcomed that test.

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WHAT may be regarded as some of the most essential benefits of the Parliament? Opinions on this point naturally are widely different. That gathering is as yet too near us for adequate estimate of the results. Yet a few things are clear respecting it. Light has been thrown upon the other religions, and a fairer judgment of them made possible. Their spokesmen could

not give us much satisfactory scientific historical information concerning their own faiths. The Hindu, for example, does not know how to use the scientific method, or, if he does, cannot apply it thoroughly. European scholars are better authorities on the Vedas than the Indian pundits. But one important lesson these men could teach by their words and actions—by their conceptions of religion and their evidences of religious life. These were sufficient proof that God was working in them; that they were not left to themselves; that their religions were not “false” in contradistinction to the one “true” gospel. These men may have been imperfect, they were not “abandoned.” The religious system that can produce and sustain them must, in important elements, be from God.

Another important fact brought out was the connection between educational and benevolent enterprises on the one hand, and religious systems on the other. India declared that its people longed for education and besought American Christianity to send teachers rather than missionaries, ignorant, apparently, of the fact that in India itself Christianity, missionary Christianity, and education go hand in hand. India asked for bread for its starving millions in preference to religious teaching, of which it claimed to have enough, ignorant that the Christian missions in India have been the centres of philanthropy, and that the missionary has been the chief dispenser of bread for the body as well as the preacher of truth for the soul. However Christianity was recognized, even in that veiled criticism, as the religion which alone possessed a monopoly, not, indeed, of noble thought about education and humanitarianism, but of organized effort and permanent achievement in these lines.

Another step was taken in the direction of the ultimate religion. In the presence of truth plainly attested in so many systems of religion as were represented in the Parliament, the old idea of conquest, of struggle for victory, vanished. Truth has no business fighting itself. The problem of ultimateness must henceforth be solved in terms of growth. The issue is not between truth and a lie, but resolves itself into a matter of incorporation, assimilation, fulfilment. The Saviour’s words receive

from this point of view a larger meaning. "I came not to destroy but to fulfil." Christianity is seen to antagonize other faiths only as a larger and deeper truth can be said to antagonize a lesser one. The ultimate religion, from the platform of the Parliament of Religions, is seen to be that one which has the greatest capacity of growth manward and Godward. It need not be said that the Christ of Christianity is not only the centre but the boundless circumference of religion. For man ultimate-ness must be in a living person. In this sense not Christianity but Christ is the ultimate religion. Such was the deepest voice of this Parliament.

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THE position of the Bible in the Parliament was suggestive. The Bible is not religion or God. It is the helper toward God, the interpreter and handmaid of religion. They utterly misconceive its purpose and misplace it who would exalt it into any higher position. In the presence of the fact of religion which filled the horizon of the Parliament the Bible took its rightful place. It was not recognized as "the religion of Protestants"—to use the words of the motto of a century or so ago. The old method of bolstering up the argument by biblical proof-texts was seldom resorted to. This seeing of religious truths and phenomena in their natural and right relations was one of the greatest achievements of the Parliament, and in no other respect was this rectiscopic energy more active than in defining the position and use of the Scriptures. The Bible is studied, not because it is an object of worship, but because it reveals God, the true and only object of worship. It is revered, not because it is perfect, but because it opens the mind and heart to the vision and realization of a perfected humanity in Jesus Christ. It is to be obeyed, not because it is outward categorical religion, but because it discloses to the candid soul the religion which dwells unconsciously in every man, and because it exhibits the law of the King, the word of the Father, according to which religion is to blossom into the complete life.

In this light the Bible received high honor in the Parliament. Its words were daily on the lips of the speakers representing all

religions. It was recognized as the highest achievement in the literature of the religious consciousness, the finest expression of the religious sense, the most stimulating power in the attainment of religious life. The Bible as well as Christianity is careless of the consequences of comparison with other sacred books. Its excellence does not depend on its lofty sentiments, so that, should these be paralleled in other sacred literatures, as they are, its supremacy is threatened. The historic revelation of God among men in the Bible is that which sets this book apart. Its historical element contains its own justification. Thus while Christianity is greater than the Bible, as religion is greater than Christianity, the Bible is still normal and determining as is no other sacred book in the religious experience of the race. There is truth in those books; in this Book is the Truth revealed. In those books there is strengthening for life; in this Book is the Life of the world. Because Christ is supreme, the Bible, which records his service and his sacrifice, will be supreme among the religious literatures of mankind.

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THUS the influence of the Parliament is in the line of enlightening, broadening and rectifying the religious mind of Christianity. The temporary results may be, and doubtless will be, in some directions, weakening and destructive. Those who, on the one hand, have bound up religion with their own conceptions of revelation and the Bible are inclined to believe that the Parliament contributed to laxness and looseness. They may only harden themselves, settle themselves more solidly into their prejudices. On the other hand, those whose boast is that they think freely, which means usually to think foolishly and superficially, will find large incentive in the truly liberalizing spirit of the Parliament to strip off the few remnants left of reasonable and sober judgment. But for the rest, for the mass of sober minded, candid, aspiring and devout Christians the ultimate result of the Parliament will be a blessing in stimulating missionary activity, in clarifying and sweetening the mind, in enlarging the sympathy, in exalting and glorifying the Christ, the light and Saviour of the world.